

India's diaspora policy: Time for a rethink



*As workers face lay-offs in the Middle East and America makes it increasingly difficult to get working visas the Indian diaspora is facing new challenges. **Tridivesh Singh Maini** and **Sandeep Sachdeva** write that both the centre and states need to take proactive steps to support and engage Indians living outside their borders.*

During his three years in office, PM Modi has proactively reached out to the Indian diaspora in different countries including US, Australia, UK, the Gulf, and (most recently) Israel. He has lavished praise on this demographic for their remarkable achievements, while also reminding them of their roots. Inaugurating the 14th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indian Day) in Bengaluru in January 2017 [Modi said](#),

“There are over 30 million overseas Indians living abroad...their footprints are all over the world... Indians abroad are valued not for their strength in numbers ...they are respected for their contributions to India and the societies where they live. In foreign lands and communities across the globe, the Indian diaspora represents for their values. They are hardworking, law abiding and peace loving, and are role models for other communities.”

The policy of reaching out to the Indian diaspora began in earnest during the tenure of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In 1998, following the nuclear tests, the BJP government brought out [NRI bonds](#) and these were a success thanks to the support of the diasporic community. It was under NDA 1 that Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was first launched in 2003.



Image: Modi about to address a diaspora crowd at Wembley Stadium during his UK visit in 2015. Credit: [Number 10/Georgina Coupe](#). Crown Copyright

It is clear that the Modi government wants to leverage the Indian diaspora as a foreign policy tool. While addressing the diaspora in Netherlands, the PM [stated](#), “Every Indian abroad is a diplomat.” But the Prime Minister wants the diaspora not just to represent India’s interests overseas, but also to contribute to India’s economic development by investing back home and contributing to development schemes undertaken by the government. While reaching out to the diaspora on his recent trip Modi sought assistance for *Make in India* and [stated](#), “If you want to give back to India, this is the best time to do so.” In the Netherlands he also [insisted](#), “The India of the 21st century cannot stay behind when it comes to technology and infrastructure. Everything we have must be world class.”

Symbiotic relationship

The Government of India has been responsive to issues facing the diaspora. In 2015 the Indian government launched [Operation Raahat](#) to evacuate Indian citizens along with other foreign nationals when war broke out in Yemen, which echoed steps taken to airlift the diaspora community from [Kuwait in 1990](#). The Government of India has made other initiatives such as launching the [Overseas Citizen of India](#) (OCI) card, which makes it easier for the diaspora to connect with the homeland, secure lifelong Indian visas, avoid checks at local police stations during visits, and own non-agricultural land.

Changes which India needs to take note of

While the Modi government's initiatives should be welcomed, India is likely to face some important challenges as a result of the changing economic and geopolitical environment.

The Indian diaspora is experiencing uncertainty due to layoffs in the Middle East, predominantly in the construction sector as the number of government projects fell following the oil crisis. In general there has been a significant dip in the number of Indian workers being employed in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries as a result of the economic slowdown. In addition government policies, such as minimum referral wages and a new 'eMigrate' system initiated to protect blue collar workers from exploitation have made it more costly and/or bureaucratic for Gulf employers to hire Indians. Migrant workers from other parts of South Asia, particularly Bangladesh and Pakistan, [have benefitted as a result](#). The crisis in Qatar is further likely to muddy the waters.

The Indian economy could face serious repercussions as a result of these changes because it receives a substantial chunk of its total remittances from workers in the Gulf. A [Crisil report](#) estimated that remittances from Gulf reduced 2% to 35.9 Billion USD (as of May, 2016).

The diaspora in the Western world is also facing challenges. In recent months, both United States President Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull have revised business visa rules to restrict the entry of skilled migrants. The American move in particular has come as a major shock to the Indian diaspora since many of them are professionals, [especially in the IT industry](#), who have benefited from the H1-B regime.

Very little media or policy attention is given to the new challenges faced by the Indian diaspora and there is a need for an innovative approach for dealing with them. Looking at the problems faced by this demographic in the Gulf, central and state governments should work closely to set up an organisation for rehabilitation of returning workers who have been laid off, and helping aspiring migrant workers to find employment. An entrepreneurship fund that encourages the workers who have been laid off to set up their individuals ventures in India, based on their skill sets, would also be helpful. There have been some steps towards providing support. For example, during his visit to UAE in December 2016, Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan also [announced](#) a six-month compensation package for Gulf returnees.

At the same time, the government should seek greater participation of Indian diaspora in programs like 'Start up India and Stand Up India' to foster cooperation beyond slogans. India's ties with the diaspora in the Gulf as well as the West need to be redefined given the geopolitical as well as economic disruptions under way and cannot be driven solely by nostalgia.

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